

Effective Parent's Toolkit

Catch Them Doing Good

Core Material – Reading (Catch them doing Good)



How often do we have people to cheer us on in life? How often does someone let us know that they see how great we truly are? Usually, children only hear something when they make mistakes, or when something does not turn out right. Part of creating a "safe space" for our children is making sure that they know that we see them at their best. To create that space is to believe in them when they cannot believe in themselves and to see the truth when they cannot immediately do this for themselves, and to be the source of that strength,

building their belief in themselves, even when things go wrong.

We all crave acceptance and children are no exception to this feeling. To feel bad, guilty, "not good enough", or wrong is a typical perspective we have, usually put there by someone who was judging us. Without knowing it, parents often judge their kids, meaning well, hoping to inspire improvement or at least a desire to try harder, but instead, sometimes planting the seeds of inadequacy, and lower self esteem. It is important to encourage improvement, and acknowledge mistakes and failures, but it is equally, if not more important to balance that with identifying, acknowledging and praising the good, even if it isn't always easy to find.

This is not about never correcting bad behavior or poor performance, it is about balance. When a child is always told when he is doing wrong, and never caught doing something right, they will learn that they never do anything right, and therefore, why even try? This begins a downward spiral of bad behavior or performance, proving they are what they have been told, and making it almost impossible to find something to praise.

When to Acknowledge

Praise or recognition comes after the child has taken a positive action. However praise or recognition is not just about the action, it is about who the child is *being* while they are behaving in this way. Recognize the child for what that action or behavior means, or how it impacts others, helping them see outside their own personal action. For example, if a child who is learning a new behavior (like clearing his plate from the table) performs the task without being asked, the parent might recognize this by saying, "John, that was very nice, I appreciate you help." Or if a child could have behaved badly, but chose a better option, "Marilynn, I was very proud of how you handled that situation. I could see that wasn't easy, and you really turned a bad situation around, Thank you." Even for a child that is struggling with making change, and they aren't quite there yet, you can recognize the effort, which goes a long way to encourage improvement that continuing to criticize the lack of perfection, "John, I can really see that you are trying hard. I am proud of your effort. It won't be long before you can do it every time!" We cheer them on, support them to take the next step with courage, and help them to see what they did to get those results.

We do not always have to recognize only what was successful. Many times some of the best lessons come from what did not work out well, when it did not turn out to be exactly the way we wanted it to be. As parents, we have the opportunity to recognize the effort or what it took to take the action, what lessons were learned and how it will now support the child to grow and develop even further. That means we can recognize all the steps the child is taking from beginning to end. It is, however, important, when recognize your child, to avoid the word "but" after saying something wonderful to them. For example, "that was great, but..." The word "but" in a sentence has a tendency to negate what was said before it. When recognizing your child,, you want them to feel good about what they did even if it did not produce the desired result. Emphasize the experience to learn from it in order to grow and improve upon it next time. Remember, this is a process and not everyone is going to go out and get it right the first time. It takes time and this is why this type of recognition is so important because it supports the child to learn and develop further. It helps the child understand what aspects of what they did worked. Keep in mind, your recognition or praise must be sincere and truthful. It must be more than what Kegan and Lacey refer to as the "customary praising, stroking...handing out warm fuzzies and 'attaboys'" (Kegan and Lacey, 2001). We don't just say something is great if it is not. In fact, we use the opportunity to acknowledge not just what the child is doing but how they might improve on the next step of their learning journey.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "If you look for the bad in people expecting to find it, you surely will." But the same is true if you're looking for the best in someone, you'll see it. If you're looking for their flaws you'll see these too. Praise or recognition could be described as simply noticing your child doing things right and telling them. When we acknowledge the good deeds of children, they tend to do more of them. When we believe in our children we support their higher vision of themselves to succeed. As parents our objective is to hold the highest possible potential for a child to achieve and succeed. Their success is our success.

Recognizing is different than giving a compliment. When we give a compliment, it is about us. For example if I say, "I like your drawing," I am simply saying I approve what you are drawing because it pleases me. However, when I recognize my child for their action or effort, it removes me from the picture and instead the situation is completely about the child. If I say, "I see how much effort you are putting into this drawing and how much detail it has. You have really captured the fluffiness of that cat." This statement is about the child, and it is more empowering and positive in nature.

Encourage

There is a Chinese proverb that states: "The participant's perspectives are clouded while the bystander's views are clear." There are many times when the child cannot see what we, as their parent, can see. This is so, because we have the advantage of experience, age, and a view of a larger perspective, plus we have not been buffeted and rocked by the challenges, difficulties and emotions that the child may have experienced. We may be able to see the situation more clearly than the child or to see something a child may have overlooked, especially in the midst of and emotional upset.

Praise or recognition occurs after action, whereas encouragement relates to actions in the future. When we encourage we hold the child's vision of the future up to them and support them to move towards it. Encouragement goes a long way when the child is feeling that things are not working out, or they are not being supported in different areas of their lives.

When we encourage our child, we say things like:

- "I know you can do this. Look how far you've come."
- "You are a strong person. I know you will get through this."
- "I believe in you."

Many times children are in the "muck and mire" and cannot see the other side of a situation. This is when, as parents, we hold a higher vision about them. We let them know what we see and encourage them to keep going on to reach that vision.

Hold a Vision

Part of holding a vision is also reminding the child of how far they have come. A powerful strategy for holding the vision is to recall experiences they have had which seemed impossible but became possible. When we hold a vision for our child we say things like:

- "What can you tell me that shows that you can do this?"
- "Tell me what happened when you were challenged with (insert a goal that they achieved)?"

As parents, we help turn the vision into reality, the dream into an achievement and the goal into an accomplishment. Encouragement leads to persistence and attainment.

Validation

This is a similar concept to recognition and is very much related to the present. Sometimes the most valuable thing we can give our child is confirmation that they are doing the right thing, or at least, are on the right track. Uncertainty and change can be scary at times, especially when you are working on changing behavior, or even just growing up and taking on new challenges. We are conditioned as human beings to believe there is one right choice or course of action to take when there are, in fact, any number of positive options. Unfortunately there are any number of opportunities in life and in school, the neighborhood, or on the court or field to hear about the wrong choices they are supposedly making and very few opportunities to hear what they are doing well. It is little wonder that children actually bloom when we confirm or validate what they are doing is the right thing, whether it be in taking a positive action, dealing with other kids, making difficult decisions, and so forth.

When we validate our children we say things like:

- "You're doing really well with that".
- "You're right on track."
- "I believe that is a wise decision and I support you in doing that."
- "Good for you, for coming up with this plan."
- "You are the type of person who can handle this. Let's go for it."

When validating a child, we are letting them know we support them in the action they are going to take, as well as in the actions they are currently taking. Support here helps clear out doubt and disbelief in oneself.

"We all have self-doubts from time to time. Our confidence is shaken. We lack the faith in our talents and skills to go for an important promotion or launch a new initiative. Having someone believe in you at these times is priceless. The stories of great men and women are saturated with examples of someone who believed in them even when they did not fully believe in themselves." (Michael Angier, president and founder of Success Networks International.)

Celebration

Celebrating means giving yourself permission to stop for a moment and enjoy what your child has already accomplished. It provides the opportunity to stop and take a look back in time and savor the moment. It also provides a chance to review what worked and what did not work. What they want to do more of in life and what actions they will not repeat in the future. Most families are not in the habit of celebrating. At least, not the small things in life. Most people

usually celebrate special events and major accomplishments. However, it is worth celebrating the small steps along the way that help us reach the major goals in life. Celebration is important because it gives us time to reflect on our accomplishments and acknowledge our achievements.

The art of celebrating also provides the opportunity for others to participate in your child's accomplishment. It also provides an opportunity for them to acknowledge the people in their lives who have supported and assisted them in reaching this goal. Hardly ever does anyone achieve something by themselves. An all important step in goal setting that is sometimes overlooked is the need for celebration. When setting goals, one of the most powerful questions to ask a child is: "How will you celebrate when you reach this goal?"

Creating structures for celebration builds in an automatic way to reward and reflect on the accomplishment(s). To support your child, get into the habit of building in a structure for celebrating. This helps reinforce the concept of taking time to think about and enjoy the progress.

Ways that children can celebrate:

- Treat them to something special, like an icecream or special dessert.
- Indulge in a "treat" that he or she has not experienced in a long time.
- Take a trip to a favorite place.
- Do the Happy Dance together!
- Put a Star on a Chart
- Serve their dinner on a "special" plate reserved only for celebration

Celebration is so individual in its expression. Find out what it means to celebrate for each of your children. What are they grateful for and how do they like to celebrate their achievements? Discuss what it means to the child to have achieved this goal and help them plan their celebration.

You can actually parent effectively by just using praise or recognition, encouragement, validation and celebration. This is a very strong statement, but it's true. If you simply help your child see and appreciate their strengths you will empower them to do better. If you acknowledge them when they are operating at their best, then you allow their "best self" to grow. When you validate them at moments of self-doubt you will drive this doubt away. To focus on what is good in their life right now and what they are doing right will often produce significant results irrespective of other techniques.

References

Angier, Michael, 2006, *Self Improvement and Motivation*, SuccessNet.org

Kegan, Robert and Lahey, Lisa, 2001, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*.

Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Summary and Review Questions

1. Think of a time in your life when you have been acknowledged. How did it make you feel?
2. Think of an accomplishment your child had that you could have celebrated – what would you do differently now?
3. What do you think are the benefits in recognizing your child as part of your regular parenting?

Action Steps – Putting it All into Action
